

The Sabbath Breath

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Aug. 21, 2022

When I took the month of July off for vacation, I had the rare experience of having four Sundays off. I'm not sure I've had that opportunity in more than 25 years of church work, and certainly not in my few years as a priest. I had to decide where I was going to go to church. On some of those Sundays I was in town. Others I was visiting family or friends. And I have to tell you friends: I was tempted. I was tempted to sleep in. I was tempted to stay in pajamas and tune into a livestream, despite a church being right around the corner. And then I encountered that very familiar voice that kicks in at times like this. It sounds a bit like my mother. And I had that old feeling I can get in my tummy. Catholic guilt. All purpose Catholic guilt, not just the Roman kind, though that's the brand I was raised with. And I thought, a priest probably shouldn't skip church for four weeks, even if it is vacation, especially when all I have to do is show up. I don't even have to wear my collar. And so I went, to four different Episcopal services in July. Some with great preaching and music, others with ... dear people.

But the effort made me remember that keeping Holy the Lord's day – especially when it's not your job to do it -- can be actually a little hard. There are other things that want the time, other people to consider if you're not in your home or town. Perhaps that's why rules on observing the Sabbath properly show up again and again throughout Scripture as well as history – often with threats of punishment or expulsion or Hell. Even Jesus got in trouble for not doing it quite right, breaking the Sabbath rules against work, even when the work in question was healing a woman who had suffered for years with a bent spine.

It's not that Jesus didn't take the Sabbath seriously – I think he took it very seriously as one dedicated to bringing on the Kingdom of God that the Sabbath imagines and ritualizes. But he also knew that religious rules can also be particularly oppressive – can prevent healing or actually distance people from God's love – if they are acts of power and not humility.

When my kids were little, getting everyone to church often seemed more like an occasion for sin, complete with shouting matches about what people were wearing and how late we were. And I have to admit there were times when I weaponized worship, like the time I was at the end of my parental rope and threatened to put my then five-year-old in time-out on the altar area next to priest's chair if he didn't start behaving. Good thing Jesus wasn't there to see that! Oh... wait.

So the Lord of the Sabbath may have a lot to say how we keep holy his day. But I don't think it would be based on whether we got there on time, or how well behaved our kids were, if we were dressed appropriately, or if we agreed with every word of the Creed. But rather, I think Jesus wants us to use this day to ensure that we and the people around us are free – free of shame, free of exclusion, free of distraction, free to allow God to enter into our lives and make a home there.

“And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” Jesus asked his detractors. And he put his opponents to shame, while others in the crowd rejoiced.

Israel's sabbath was not a forced march through oppressive rituals. It was, and still is for many Jews, a 25 hour period of joy, free of labor (the sages listed 34 types of work that were to be avoided).¹ It was a time of prayer and worship and gratitude for God's covenant, marked by gathering with family and friends for meals and blessings and for singing and studying. It was a day to remember that God provided bread in the desert and to eat an extra meal out of joy and celebration. It was a day to imagine freedom.

On the Sabbath Day when the bent-over woman found Jesus teaching in the Synagogue, she encountered one who truly believed that God's love does not rest on that day. And neither should ours.

This was not new in Israel. Isaiah also called his people to keep holy the Sabbath in a way that put the interests of others and of God ahead of their own personal agendas. They were to come with hearts primed by a spiritual practice that removed people's burdens, that didn't blame or slander, that attended to the bodily needs of people who were hungry or afflicted, like that bent-over woman.

Do that, and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in, Isaiah promised. And that was all before arriving at worship on Saturday.

What if that is what Sabbath means for us as well. What if the Lord's Day were a day to free one another of the world's worry and distractions, its false gods and its demands, and instead gather in such a way that we are overwhelmed by the love and presence of God? What if the Sabbath were the day to gather the strength to go out and repair the breach and to restore the streets that we live in? Because the breach these days is quite large, and our streets quite troubled.

How do we get to a Sabbath like that? How do we tune out all the distractions, even the ones that occur right in the liturgy and open ourselves to the healing presence of Christ?

Well, we might need to start small -- with just one little breath that can remind us of how God makes a Sabbath home in us, how God rests in us and we in God. If you're familiar with mindfulness or meditation practices this might be a little familiar. Just try it with me.

I invite you to close your eyes and take some slow breaths in and out. As you breath in, just put all your attention on your breath, notice how it fills your lungs, asks for release, how it flows out of your mouth or nose, and your body relaxes. And turns around and goes right back in. Just spend a few moments breathing with your focus on nothing but your breath.

¹ The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion (2 ed.) Edited by: Adele Berlin
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199730049.001.0001/acref-9780199730049-e-2699?rskey=EoINfp&result=2699>

Now as you breath in, I want you to imagine that God's love is riding on that breath, that each breath is like an invitation for God to rest in you. Breathing in – you invite God to dwell in you. Breathing out: God settles in. Breathing in: This is our God. Breathing out: We are God's people.

If you need a reminder of what the Lord's Day is all about, try taking a few Sabbath breaths – as an intentional way to allow God in, to invite God to stay, the ultimate act of worship.

One breath at a time, to undo the disappointments and bad theology and threats of time-out that have marred the Sabbath for so many of us. One breath at a time to remind us of what it means to be filled by the Spirit of God.

Is one breath enough? You tell me whether in the history of breathing one breath has ever been enough.

But one mindful breath leads to another, and another.

Catch your Sabbath breath and you might have what you need in the lungs of your soul to pray the prayers or sing the songs, to wish one another peace. Let it relax your tense shoulders and ease your mind, and you might have the calm to hear the Word and receive the bread and let God overwhelm your heart and mind and soul.

That calm, that gratitude, that love, that community, that life in God may become as easy for us as breathing.

Amen.